LOVE CAN NEVER LOSE ITS OWN
Mark 15:42-16:8
April 19, 1981 Easter

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

In the middle of the television coverage of the flight of Columbia, our nation's space shuttle, someone thought to interview Check Yeager, now General Yeager, former test pilot. Yeager flew the X-series planes that own all the speed and altitude records and which twenty or so years ago first broke the legendary sound barrier. Yeager was the pilot. The interviewer invited him to reflect on how we have pushed back the borders of the unknown in the intervening years. General Yeager was simple and eloquent. He said that at the time, many smart people believed it couldn't be done: intelligent people thought they had scientific evidence that no object can move faster than sound, and that an airplane would disintegrate as it broke through that barrier.

One of the exciting aspects of life in this era is the reminder, repeated daily, that we don't know everything we thought we knew. Twenty years ago, the event we all watched last week, would have been consigned to the comic strips or the naive fantasies of the dreamers and visionaries. There was a time, not very long in fact, when we were confident that we knew about all there was to know and that the major intellectual assignment facing the race was the cataloging of all the final information we had discovered.

We are a little less confident today, a little more modest. Space exploration has taught us what we don't know. Astro physics deals with concepts such as a universe expanding at the speed of light into infinity and suddenly you and I realize that things are not nailed down as tightly as we assumed.Most of us have trouble with that, however. The visionaries and futurists may be comfortable contemplating entirely new ways of perceiving, but most of us trust the scientific method without even thinking about it.

Seeing is not only believing, for us...in a real way, believing is seeing. We have come to assume, quite unconsciously of course, that we may believe only what we can see: only what we can touch, weigh, measure and reduce to component parts. Faith is limited by knowledge: common sense dictates what we believe and don't believe.

So we come to church on Easter Sunday thinking that we know what it's all about, our analytical powers turned on full, assuming that Easter involves daffodils and the rebirth of life, or perhaps the immortality of noble principals that live on from one generation to the next; we hide ourselves in a well dressed crowd hoping against hope that the preacher won't say something silly, something our cognitive capacity tells us isn't true, something about a resurrection; or hoping, at least, that if he gets into it he'll have the graciousness to couch it in enough theological jargon that it won't matter much one way or the other.

If only we had proof! If we had the courage to be honest, most of us would confess that we come to church on Easter morning in the same way three women came to a tomb in Joseph's garden, early in the morning on the first day of the week, a very long time ago: tentatively, assuming they knew what they would find there, knowing what happened and what it meant.

The trouble with the only thing resembling an eyewitness account is that the writer is very stingy with detail. The trouble with the Gospel accounts of the

Resurrection is that they were written for people who already believed it: they don't even bother to argue the case, they simply state it, sparsely, sparingly. Someone has pointed out that the New Testament can't hold a candle to the medieval paintings of the stone split down the middle and the sovereign Christ stepping out, and the soldiers fainting and the angels singing Hallelujah Choruses. Can you imagine what the people who brought us Masada could do with the Resurrection?

The earliest account is Mark's. It is the briefest and plainest. Three women go to the tomb to annoint the body. When they arrive the stone has been moved, a young man tells them Jesus is not there, and the three women leave, frightened, and agreeing with one another that no matter what happened their lips are sealed: they aren't talking to anyone. That's all there is to it and I have come to appreciate its leanness. It doesn't press hard, argue, debate: it doesn't ask you to shut your eyes and swallow hard, it simply tells it.

So abruptly does Mark end his account that scholars have speculated about the possibilities: perhaps he wrote a glorious conclusion about the Resurrection appearances and the marvelous faith of the disciples and it was lost, torn off and forgotten: or perhaps an editor somewhere along the line didn't care for it and simply eliminated it: or perhaps Mark was interrupted as he wrote by the Roman authorities and carted off the prison. (See David H.C.Read Unfinished Easter).

I think Mark wrote it that way. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ was so real, so central to the whole life of the Christians that he saw no need for spelling out the sequel to the empty tomb. He was living it. He and the others had encountered a whole new way of living - in the presence of a Lord who was alive and at work in the world. St. Paul called it, enigmatically the "New Being". And C.S.Lewis wrote - "He has forced open a door that has been locked...Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened." (The Joyful Christian, p.65).

The point of Easter is not that in an isolated incident in history a dead man came back to life, and that if you can swallow that you probably won't have trouble imagining the same thing happening to yourself sometime. Of course, that's exactly what it is for many...David Read calls it "an exercise in religious nostalgia to the sound of trumpets". If that's all this day is, it's no wonder folk come now but not again. What the faith proclaims, however, is a risen Lord and therefore the reality of the Resurrection in the midst of your life and mine tomorrow and next week and next month.

The point is, first, that God is faithful. "Rise, shine, for your light has come", the prophet wrote to a miserable band of Jewish exiles, 2,500 years ago. Easter is our assertion that the God who brought His people out of exile, the God who - before that - heard their cries and liberated them from oppression in Egypt - that same God has raised His son - and will continue to do that sort of thing in history. Easter means that the future may be regarded, not as the enemy and time the relentless pursuer, but as friend, as adventure, as the delightful prospect of surprises which may be anticipated now, not in fear and trembling, but in full confidence and joy. The Resurrection means that God is faithful and may be trusted.

The point is that love is strong. That Friday cross, that monstrous injustice stands for a lot that is wrong about human life. The crucifixion of Jesus stands for little Jewish children waiting in line in front of the concentration camp shower room; it is the same category with automobile accidents and cancer.

It stands for unfairness, injustice, irrational evil. In theological terms Friday's cross means that the power of sin and death has no rival, that despair is the only appropriate emotional pasture. Easter's empty tomb, however, means that there is another word on the subject; that there is one thing stronger, more powerful, more real, and that is the love of God. And once we have seen the faithfulness of God, and the strength of His love, the point becomes the very good news that God's love for you - for me - for all people - does not end in death. It is not the only meaning of the day: in fact, in isolation it degenerates into nostalgia. But the love of God for each individual is at the center of it all. It is a meaning best expressed in a line of John Greenleaf Whittier.

"Life is ever Lord of death
And love can never lose its own."

I think about that line a lot. I think about it in the middle of many of the more difficult duties of my profession. I think about it in connection with my relationships, and the source of meaning in my life. I knew the line and was surprised to discover that it is from Snowbound. Remember that poem you had to read sometime in the distant past? Whittier is telling about an experience from his own childhood. Using unforgetable images he describes the storm, its aftermath, the cozy family hearth - and each person who was present. In the middle, between storm and family circle the poet reflects...

"O Time and Change!...
How strange it seems with so much gone.
Of life and love, to still live on!
O brother, only I and thou
Are left of all that circle now...
Alas for him who never sees
The stars shine through his cypress trees!
Who, hopeless, lays his dead away,
Nor looks to see the breaking day.
Across the mournful marbles play!
Who hath not learned in hours of faith
The truth to flesh and sense unknown,
That life is ever Lord of death,
And love shall never lose its own."
(The Poems of Whittier, p.401, line 203ff).

What is it about us that holds us back from embracing that? Is it an innate negativism that concludes that nothing that good could be true? Is it an experienced cynicism that concludes finally that the sum of everything is nothing, that life is absurd, meaningless, finally? At heart I believe our hesitance is honorable: we suspect that any notion of life after death, eternal life, is simply a reflection of our pride, our inability to contemplate a world without us in it.

There is something honorable and strong about the sentiment and the consequent courage to square our shoulders, to live our lives fully and be content with our lot. And yet the argument can be joined from the opposite point of view, and it has been eloquently and persuasively.

"Can it be that God is the most unscrupulous waster in the universe?" Harry Emerson Fosidck asked, "Making great personalities only to throw them utterly away?" (Questions People Ask, p.31).

I think the most persuasive argument of all is that at heart our longing, our need, our crying out to the living God, our simple inability to accept the finality of death - is not the desperate whining of selfish people grasping at straws for a little more time. Is isn't that at all. It comes, not from egotism or arrogance - but from love, itself God's greatest gift.

I encountered that this week in a marvelous essay by Martin Marty, Church historian at the University of Chicago, one of the brightest Christians around. Those who read Marty's fortnightly column in the Christian Century know that his wife is gravely ill and that sometime ago, in a poignant essay he explained how they would spend whatever time remained together. And so his Easter column commanded attention. Always urbane, creative, Marty sets up a conversation between Gabriel Marcel and the New Testament. Let's listen in...

> A Macel character says, "Nothing is easier at a certain time of life than to accept death for oneself...what cannot be accepted is the death of the beloved one, more deeply still the death of love itself."
>
> And the New Testament answers, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."
>
> Marcel, "Because I love you, because I affirm you as being, there is something in you that can bridge the abyss that I vaguely call death..."

And Marty reflects: "I cannot picture anyone who will hear the message of life without having in mind the images of lovers, friends, family members, who call forth demands for us to acknowledge that love is stronger than death." (The Christian Century, 4/15/81, M.E.M.O., p.431).

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is an affirmation not about human immortality essentially, but about the incredible faithfulness of God - who has promised to stand with us every day of our lives, even the last day. It is an affirmation about His incredible love that will never abandon us - an affirmation that "life is ever Lord of death, and love can never lose its own."

Religious nostalgia to the sound of trumpets? It can be that I suppose... and yet, allow me to suggest something more, something that envelopes all of life, the way we perceive, the way we live and love and die. Let me suggest in words which will not bear all the meaning with which I would invest them that Jesus Christ is alive - that the tomb was empty, and that Mark's incomplete conclusion was exactly right. Let me suggest - that God's redemptive love - which is to say, His risen son - is alive and well and at work in the world: knocking on the door of prejudice, oppression, sexism: let me suggest that I see Resurrection in a world no longer patient with injustice; that I perceive the risen Lord casting out the devil of racism and turning attention now to poverty, hunger. I see a risen Lord at work where sickness is healed, where broken relationships are mended, where distressed minds are soothed and where hopeless people are embraced.

And I dare, this day, to see Resurrection in my life and your life; not in a carefully prescribed emotional high, but exactly where we find ourselves pushed and pulled to love more, and give more, and forgive more, and live more. And I invite you to dare, today, to believe what you may not have seen - to listen to instincts God has given you...instincts that tell you that, "Love will never lose its own.

Jesus Christ is risen...go...tell His disciples...He is going before you...

Amen.